

READING: The Mask of Anarchy

"Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war.

And if then the tyrants dare,
Let them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim and hew,
What they like, that let them do.

With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear, and less surprise
Look upon them as they slay
Till their rage has died away

Then they will return with shame
To the place from which they came,
And the blood thus shed will speak
In hot blushes on their cheek.

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you-
Ye are many — they are few

Thoreau's Civil Disobedience

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I like many of you was raised as a law-abiding and nation-loving citizen. The laws we obey and the country we love were forged by lawmakers in the governments that various “majorities” of my fellow citizens have elected, and as such reflect the will and wisdom of those majorities. And this Rule of Law has been effective – for some of us - but not for all. Women were not allowed to vote in Canada and not included as part of this majority until 1919 – 1940 in Quebec.

It was the Rule of Law that created the oppressive history of our relationships with the First Nations peoples – one strewn with shame, neglect and abuse.

It was the Rule of Law that The Government of Canada collected a head tax from about 81,000 Chinese immigrants in the early part of the last century. The \$50 head tax enabled those governments to continue its exploitation of Chinese labour – who were exempt from the tax - for the building of our national railway without the inconvenience of dealing with the families of those pioneers who could not afford to come here during those years.

It was under the rule of Law that in 1942 our “wise” lawmakers determined that 22,000 Canadian citizens of Japanese ethnicity be stripped of their natural freedoms, forced from their homes against their will, and moved to eight internment camps in the interior of BC for the duration of the Second World War. The impassioned opposition to this measure by a young John Diefenbaker who defended Canadians of Japanese and German descent fell on deaf ears. That bill was supported by an overwhelming majority

of Canadians.

It was under the Rule of Law that until 1969 homosexual activity was considered illegal in Canada and enforced by laws supported by a majority of Canadians. The change in that law due in large measure to the imprisonment of one man George Klippert - the last person in Canada to be arrested, charged, prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned for homosexuality – and imprisoned indefinitely – until his release in 1971 – after a court-ordered psychiatrist assessed Klippert as "incurably homosexual."

It is clear from these few historical examples that our laws are not always fair or just or right. What should we do when this is so? Should we refuse to obey an unjust law? Or, should we begrudgingly accept the law and work behind the scenes to change or repeal the law?

This was the moral dilemma that Henry David Thoreau faced when he wrote his famous essay on “Civil Disobedience” in 1849 – the essay was his response to the injustice of Slavery. This essay had a profound influence on the non-violent civil rights movements of both Mahatma Gandhi and of Martin Luther King. In the 1940's it was read by the Danish resistance to NAZI tyranny. In the 1950's it was cherished by those who opposed McCarthyism in the United States; in the 1960's it was influential in the struggle against South African apartheid; and in the 1970's it became the mantra of a new generation of anti-war activists during the Viet Nam era.

What was it that Thoreau said that had such a profound impact on those movements? What might you and I take from this essay today that can help us determine what our response should be to what you or I see as an unjust law?

The first point Thoreau makes in his essay – perhaps his strongest point - is that Most governments are usually “inexpedient – and all are inexpedient sometimes.” This of course flies in the face of what most governments would have us believe. Governments are – in general – not well suited for their stated purpose. Be wary of government. Governments are corporations – corporations are not individuals – corporations do not have thoughts – nor do they have a conscience.

Second: Governments are equally liable to be abused and perverted before people can act through them. The abuse need not be excessive nor the perversion obvious. The pressure applied on governments by special interests and factions to limit the “damage” to those factions or special interests is enormous.

Third: Governments do not keep people free, nor do governments educate. Did your education come to you from your government – or did it come from your reading and your experience. Are you a free thinker? Do you thank your government every day for this?

Fourth: Governments in which majorities rule cannot be based on justice. The question here is really whether the will of the majority reflects what is right. The majority of Canadians wanted to have the Japanese interred in 1942.

Fifth: Thoreau says that we should be humans first and subjects afterward. Citizens agree to surrender some of our natural human freedoms. In the absence of government for example I would be free to do whatever I want to anyone I want. We set up governments to restrict some of those freedoms because total anarchy just does not seem to work in civil societies. But, just what freedoms do we agree to surrender when we create government? What freedoms do we consider inalienable? Thoreau's point is

that we are humans first – and that we are all of us human. Whatever we agree to surrender – it must never include anything that strips us of our humanity. The point here is that we are humans first, and we then agree to be subject to restrictions in order to have a civil society. If we are subjects first, then whatever freedoms we do retain are those that your government decides was best for us – that approach underlies all of the examples of laws I mentioned earlier. Each of those laws was wrong because in each case was based in a dehumanizing principle: women are human beings first; as are First Nations, Chinese and Japanese peoples; our sexual orientation is part of our nature as human beings.

Sixth: It is not the cultivation of a respect for the law that is important; what is important is the cultivation of a respect for what is right. The only obligation which you or I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what you or I think right. A government is a corporation. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience.

Seventh: The mass of people serve the State not as people, but as machines with their bodies. The State is an artificial thing. It does not live. It does not breathe. We do not worship it; we do not bow before it; it is an arrangement.

Eighth: All human beings reserve the right of revolution: that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.

Ninth: It is not so important that many should be as good as you, as that there should be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump.

Tenth: A wise person will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to

prevail through the power of the majority. We have a duty individually and collectively and independently of government to determine what is right. It is not the function of government to determine what is right.

Eleventh: It is not your duty to devote yourself to the eradication of every wrong – (life is complex and we have many concerns) – but it is your duty not to give a wrong your support, and to ensure that you not pursue your concerns sitting on another's shoulder. A person cannot do everything, but it is not necessary ever to do something wrong. This point addresses the concern of powerlessness that many feel in a complex world. No – we cannot fix the world or individually correct a massive injustice – BUT, we can refuse to support a wrong, and we can refuse to do something that requires us to cause harm to another.

Twelfth: Those of us who – while we disapprove of the character and measures of a government – yield our allegiance and support, are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and the most serious obstacles to reform.

Thirteenth: Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded (sin for awhile), or shall we transgress them at once? It was under regimes such as these that – with the grudging support of majorities – that a Christ was crucified, a Copernicus condemned, a Luther excommunicated, a Galileo exiled (and Nazism thrived). If you are required to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the Law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. Do not lend yourself to the wrong that you condemn. Is there not blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a person's real humanity and immortality flow out, and we bleed to an everlasting death.

Fourteenth: Under a regime which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just

person is also a prison. [The argument here is that the State is itself dishonorable and by allying oneself with the State we place ourselves in dishonour] If anyone think their influence would be lost in prison, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively you can combat injustice when you experience a little in your own person.

Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative it to keep all just men in prison, or to give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year that would not be as violent and bloody a measure as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and to shed innocent blood.

Fifteenth: It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State than it would cost me to obey. I should feel that I would be worth less in that case.